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VARIATIONS IN TEACHERS' REINFORCEMENT STYLE AND IMITATIVE BEHAVIOR OF CHILDREN DIFFERING IN PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND.

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TO STUDY THE EFFECTS OF DIFFERING TEACHER REINFORCEMENT BEHAVIOR ON STUDENTS, 21 MIDDLE-CLASS AND 12 LOWER-CLASS MALE NINTH- AND 10TH-GRADE REMEDIAL READING STUDENTS WERE SHOWN TWO FILMS. THE FIRST DEPICTED A "POSITIVE" TEACHER WHO CONSISTENTLY REWARDED CORRECT RESPONSES WHILE NEGLECTING INCORRECT ONES, AND THE SECOND SHOWED A "NEGATIVE" TEACHER WHO CONSISTENTLY CRITICIZED INCORRECT RESPONSES WHILE IGNORING CORRECT ONES. EACH TEACHER DISPLAYED A SET OF DISTINCTIVE INCIDENTAL BEHAVIORS, (FOR EXAMPLE, "POSITIVE" TEACHER SAYING "THINK" AND POINTING TO HIS FOREHEAD, "NEGATIVE" TEACHER SAYING "LISTEN" AND CUPPING HER EAR) THE STUDENTS' IMITATION OF WHICH CONSTITUTED THE MAJOR DEPENDENT VARIABLE. AFTER VIEWING, THE BOYS WERE TAKEN SINGLY TO A ROOM, INFORMED THAT THEY WERE TO PLAY SCHOOL AND ASSUME THE ROLE OF TEACHER. THE EXPERIMENTER AND AN OBSERVER-RECORDER, WHO WAS AWARE OF THE HYPOTHESIS, WATCHED FROM AN ADJOINING ROOM EQUIPPED WITH ONE WAY MIRRORS AND AN INTERCOM. POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE IMITATIVE SCORES WERE DETERMINED FOR EACH BOY BY SUMMING UP THE NUMBER OF TIMES HE IMITATED THE POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE TEACHER. FINDINGS WERE--(1) MIDDLE-CLASS CHILDREN SHOWED SIGNIFICANTLY MORE IMITATION THAN DID DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN AND IMITATED THE POSITIVE TEACHER SIGNIFICANTLY MORE OFTEN, (2) THE MIDDLE-CLASS GROUP EXHIBITED A POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN A RATING OF STUDENT DEPENDENCY BY TEACHERS AND IMITATIVE BEHAVIOR, AND (3) PREFERENCE FOR A TEACHER WAS UNRELATED TO IMITATION OF A TEACHER. (AW)

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Abstract

The purpose of this investigation was to study the effects of variations in reinforcement style of a teacher upon imitative behavior and preferences of children differing in personality traits and social background. The children in the experimental group viewed two films, one depicting a "Positive" teacher, consistently rewarding correct responses; the other depicting a "Negative" teacher, consistently criticizing incorrect responses. Each teacher displayed distinctive incidental behaviors, the child's imitation of which constituted the major dependent variable. The results indicated that children from economically advantaged backgrounds imitated the Positive teacher significantly more often than the Negative teacher and showed significantly more imitation than did the Disadvantaged children. A positive relationship between dependency and imitative behavior was confirmed for the advantaged group. The findings indicated that preference for a teacher was unrelated to imitation of that teacher.

VARIATIONS IN TEACHERS' REINFORCEMENT STYLE AND IMITATIVE BEHAVIOR OF CHILDREN DIFFERING IN PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND

Norma D. Feshbach

It is well recognized that teachers have a significant influence upon the educational achievement of the child. Although less well supported by empirical data, it is also assumed that the teacher and the school are important agents in the development of various facets of the child's personality and value structure. The central focus of the present investigation is upon one of the processes mediating teacher's influence upon children's behavior. More specifically, this study is concerned with the effects of variations in the reinforcement style of a teacher upon imitative behavior and preferences of children differing in personality traits and social background.

A teacher may influence behavior directly by differentially reinforcing instances of aggression, dependency, neatness, etc., exhibited by the child, thereby affecting the probability of these behaviors' appearing at a later date. (Gewirtz, 1948.) However, children may also learn behaviors that are not directly reinforced but are incidentally acquired through mere observation.

In recent years, a number of investigations of this process of modeling or imitation have appeared. Rosenblith's (1959) study on imitation in pre-school children showed the influence of the model upon performance of a maze learning task while a series of studies by Bandura and his associates (Bandura, Ross and Ross, 1961; Bandura, Ross and Ross, 1963) have experimentally demonstrated the effects of the model's behavior on the type and frequency of aggressive behavior acquired by pre-school children. The effects of the model have been shown to vary with the similarity of the model to the child, (Kagan, Pearson and Welch, 1966), sex of the model (Rosenblith, 1959), the sex appropriateness of the behavior (Bandura, Ross and Ross, 1963) and with variations in the child's dependency (Bandura and Huston, 1961), the more dependent children manifesting greater modeling effects. An ingenious study by Ross (1966) distinguishes between the effects of a model upon intentional and incidental learning. In brief, she found that children low in dependency learned more task relevant, intentional responses from the model than did children high in dependency, while the converse was true for the imitation of task irrelevant, incidental responses.

These modeling studies, while primarily carried out with pre-school children, point to the potential influence of the elementary school teacher upon the child's acquisition of behaviors which are incidental to the immediate educational objective. These studies also indicate that the effects of modeling are not uniform and that they are probably contingent upon the characteristics of the teacher, learning situation and the learner. One might expect, for example,

that if modeling is, in part, dependent upon the secondary reinforcing properties of the model (Sears, Rau and Alpert, 1966), variations in a teacher's reinforcement value for a particular child should affect the degree of imitation found. In the present study, a comparison is made between the modeling influence of a teacher consistently rewarding correct responses and one who consistently criticizes incorrect responses. It seems probable that a teacher employing consistent praise would have greater secondary reinforcing properties than one using consistent criticism, since praise in the past is likely to have been associated with successful performance. Nevertheless, for those children who have successfully adapted to the spur of criticism, the more critical (negative) teacher may possess greater reinforcing properties. It seems reasonable to assume that such children are high in aggression, since exposure to a more punitive environment is associated with greater aggressive behavior (Sears, Maccoby and Levin, 1957).

On the basis on these considerations, coupled with previous findings, the following specific hypotheses are proposed:

1. There is significantly greater imitation of a positive teacher than of a negative teacher.
2. Children who imitate a negative teacher are significantly more aggressive than children who imitate a positive teacher.
3. Children high in dependency manifest significantly greater imitation than children low in dependency.

Aside from these specific hypotheses, this investigation will provide data bearing upon possible differences in imitative behavior

between culturally disadvantaged and culturally advantaged children, and on children's preferences for teachers differing in reinforcement style. In addition, the modeling paradigm will be extended to an elementary school age population.

The modeling paradigm to be used in the study requires that children observe teachers employing different modes of reinforcement and manifesting distinctive gestures and verbal statements incidental to their lesson presentation. The degree to which the children subsequently display these incidental responses constitutes the measure of imitation which can then be related to the independent variables of interest.

METHOD

Subjects

The 33 nine and ten year old boys who served as the primary experimental subjects in the study were drawn from a group of participants in a 6 week remedial educational program conducted by the Psychology Clinic School at the University of California, Los Angeles.[2] Twenty-one of the boys were from a middle-to-upper middle-class socio-economic background (Advantaged Group) and 12 were selected from a lower-class socio-economic background (Disadvantaged Group). The children in both groups were of average intelligence and the two groups were matched for IQ, age, and extent of reading disability.

Twelve additional boys, six from advantaged and six from disadvantaged backgrounds, matched for IQ, age and degree of reading retardation, served as control subjects (Control Group).

Procedure

The following sequence was carried out individually for the children in the Experimental Groups. After being escorted to the experimental room by a male experimenter (E), the child was informed that he was going to see two films, each of a different teacher, giving a lesson on Africa. The subject (S) was instructed to watch the films very carefully since he would be required to discuss it with E afterward. The films of both teachers were viewed successively without interruption, although the order of the films was systematically varied so that each film followed the other film half the time within each socio-economic group.

Films

Two separate four minute films[3] were prepared, each with one teacher and a group of four children depicting a lesson-question session on Africa. The props utilized in both films were the same, involving 15 pictures of African animals, chalk, and a map of Africa. The focus of the film was on the teacher and, while the children's verbal responses were distinct and clear, they appeared visually in the film only as shadowy silhouettes. The films differed from each other in three aspects: (1) type of reinforcement utilized by each teacher; (2) distinctive gestures expressed by the two teachers (incidental behavior); and (3) the color of clothing worn by the teachers.

One teacher, Positive Teacher, always made a positive verbal statement when a child responded correctly and did not react when an incorrect response was offered. The Positive Teacher frequently

prefaced her queries by encouraging the children to "think," or "think again" or "think carefully" while pointing to her forehead. Moreover, she frequently clasped her hands in a very obvious way. The Positive Teacher was attired in a yellow smock and wore amber beads, while the Negative Teacher in the other film wore a blue smock and blue beads. An important difference between the two was the fact that the latter teacher did not respond to correct answers but always made a verbally punitive or negative response when a child gave an incorrect answer. Furthermore, the Negative Teacher frequently encouraged the children to "listen," "listen carefully," "be sure to listen" when she asked them questions, while she cupped her ear in a very obvious way. Finally, the Negative Teacher frequently folded her arms in a pointed manner.

The Positive Teacher emitted 21 verbally approving remarks while the Negative Teacher made 17 disapproving remarks. The frequency of incidental gestures and incidental verbal responses were matched in both films.

Subsequent to witnessing the film, E informed S that they were going to play school and that S was going to be the teacher. Two life-size paper dolls, drawn to represent a boy and a girl of approximately the subject's own age, were presented to S as his "pupils." S was given the opportunity of assigning names to the dolls, and was encouraged to select either a yellow or blue smock to wear. Also, the map and pictures of African animals used in the film were made available to the S for his use. Since pretesting had indicated that an adult's presence in the room was in-

hibiting and distracting, E observed the subject's "instruction" from an adjacent room through a one-way vision mirror. Speakers next to each doll were connected to a microphone in the observation room, thus permitting E to verbally respond to the S's questions as if the "pupils" were answering. Although the S's were encouraged to address their lessons and questions to their "pupils," they were told that E would give the answers As soon as E left the room, the imitation period began.

Imitation

For the first seven minutes, S was allowed to "teach" his lesson without further directions; for the remaining nine minutes, S was asked to hold up the pictures of the African animals and have his "pupils" identify them. E answered the S's questions correctly 60 per cent of the time.

Present in the observation room, along with E, was an observer uninformed as to the hypotheses of the study. This observer's task was to record all of the child's behavior including questions, feedback regarding the correctness of E's answers, verbal remarks and gestures. For four of these children, a second observer was present and similarly recorded the S's behavior. Of the 229 behaviors recorded by the first observer, there were only seven instances of disagreement with the second observer's recording. Of particular interest, is the high degree of agreement in the scoring of imitative responses. Of the 11 imitative responses noted by the primary observer, 10 were scored by the second observer.

The scoring of imitative behavior was restricted to those incidental distinctive gestures and statements associated with each

teacher. Examples of such behaviors are the child's stating "think" or "listen," pointing to his forehead, cupping his ear, clasping his hands or folding his arms. A Positive imitative score and a Negative imitative score were determined for each S by separately summing the total number of responses of the Positive and the Negative Teacher. In addition, the children were characterized as Positive, Negative or Non-Imitators using the following criteria: a child had to exhibit at least two imitative responses to be characterized as an imitator; he was then classified as a Positive or Negative Imitator, depending upon which imitative score was greater. (The one child who had an equal number of Positive and Negative imitative responses was excluded from the Positive vs. Negative imitative comparisons but was included when the groups were combined.)

Preference Measures

At the termination of the observation period, E returned to the experimental room and asked a series of 4 questions regarding S's relative evaluation of the two teachers. S indicated which teacher he liked, which he thought was better, which he thought was friendlier and whom he preferred to have. A score of one was assigned to each preference for a Negative Teacher and an S's total score could range from 0 to 4. S's who obtained scores higher than two were placed in the Negative Preference Group, while S's whose total score was below two were included in the Positive Preference Group.

Personality Ratings

Each subject in the experimental group was rated by his

teacher on a nine item aggression rating scale, whose reliability and utility has been reported elsewhere. (Feshbach 1956.) The items in the scale are primarily concerned with manifest instances of overt verbal and physical acts. The scores on each item ranged from 1 to 5 yielding a total possible range from 9 to 45.

Each S in the experimental group was also evaluated by his teacher on a six item dependency-independency rating scale constructed by the author. The scoring of these items was similar to that for the Aggression scale yielding a possible range of dependency scores from 6 to 30. Three items dealt with the child's need for assurance, help and attention and three items assessed the child's self-reliance, initiative and persistence in the face of obstacles. In order to provide an estimate of internal consistency and reliability of this dependency measure, the two sets of three items were separately summed and correlated, yielding a Pearson r of .65, uncorrected for attenuation.

Control Group

The 12 control S's did not view the experimental films. However, the identical procedure for the imitation sequence in which the children were instructed to play school and be the teacher was carried out. The number of behaviors characterized as imitative for the experimental group was determined for each of the control children, thus providing an estimate of the base rate of these behaviors.

RESULTS

The distributions for the Advantaged and Disadvantaged groups of Imitative responses to the Positive and to the Negative Teachers are presented in Table 1. It is evident that many children did not imitate either the Positive or the Negative Teacher. If a criterion of at least two imitative responses is used as an index of imitation, we find that 17 of the 33 children imitated the teacher models. This finding is not entirely unexpected in view of the relative absence of such behaviors under ordinary conditions in these children. Thus, only two of the 12 children in the control group manifested more than one response in the category designated as imitative for the Experimental conditions. In addition, the Control group responses were completely restricted to the folding of arms and clasping of hands, whereas these responses constituted less than half of the imitation responses in the Experimental Group.

Of particular relevance to the first hypothesis is the greater amount of imitation elicited by the Positive as compared to the Negative teacher. For the total sample, a mean of 2.2 imitative responses was obtained for the Positive teacher while the corresponding mean for the Negative teacher was only .9, this difference in degree of imitation being significant at the .01 level, using a sign test (one tailed). It is apparent from the data however, that this difference favoring imitation of the Positive teacher holds only for the Advantaged group. ($p < .01$). The difference in the case of the Disadvantaged group is negligible,

TABLE 1

Distribution of Imitative Responses as a Function of Teaching Style, Socio-Economic Group, and Experimental Conditions

Frequencies

		0 & 1	2 & 3	≥3	Mean
Positive Teacher	Advantaged	11	4	6	2.9
	Disadvantaged	9	3	0	.9
Negative Teacher	Advantaged	17	2	2	.9
	Disadvantaged	10	0	2	.8
Combined Scores	Advantaged	10	3	8	3.8
	Disadvantaged	6	3	3	1.7
Control	Advantaged	5	1	0	.7
	Disadvantaged	5	1	0	.7

the latter showing very little imitation of either teacher. For those children who did imitate, the number of imitative responses for the advantaged group is significantly greater than that for the disadvantaged group, the Mann Whitney test yielding a U value significant at the $<.05$ level. (Two tailed). In summary, most of the incidental imitative behaviors that occurred were manifested by the advantaged children in response to the Positive teacher.

The second hypothesis relating imitation of the Negative teacher and aggression could not be adequately tested because there was so little imitation of the Negative teacher. At the same time, the considerable variation in aggression ratings among the Imitators of the Positive teacher, coupled with the fact that the most aggressive children did not imitate the Negative teacher, can be taken as evidence contrary to the hypothesis. The relationship between dependency and imitation, however, is more consistent with expectation. As Table 2 indicates, within the Advantaged group, the Imitators are significantly more dependent than the Non-Imitators and, though the difference for the Disadvantaged sample is in the same direction, it is smaller and statistically insignificant. The third hypothesis, then, which asserts that Imitators are more dependent than Non-Imitators is valid only for Advantaged children.

The Children's preferences for the teachers provides another response dimension, (in addition to imitation), for evaluating the influence of the Positive and Negative Teaching styles. As Table 3 indicates, the Advantaged children are about equally divided in

TABLE 2

Mean Dependency Ratings of Imitators
and Non-Imitators in each
Socio-economic group

Advantaged		Disadvantaged	
Imitators	Non-Imitators	Imitators	Non-Imitators
(N = 11)	(N = 10)	(N = 6)	(N = 6)
21.6	16.8	18.3	16.7
t = 2.05		t = .65	
$p < .03$ (one tailed)		$p > .10$	

TABLE 3

Frequency of Advantaged and Disadvantaged Children Preferring Positive vs. Negative Teacher

	Positive Teacher	Negative Teacher
Advantaged*	10	9
Disadvantaged	4	8

* Two children in this group would not indicate their preferences.

their preferences for the Positive or the Negative Teacher. Although the Disadvantaged children tend to prefer the Negative teacher, the difference between the two groups is not significant. The reasons the children gave for their choices provide some insights into the basis of their preference: of the children who preferred the Positive teacher, seven praised her competence and five thought she was "nice"; of the children selecting the Negative teacher, 10 felt she was the more competent and none referred to her personality. It is revealing that eight of the children preferring the Negative teacher spontaneously made a favorable comment about the Positive teacher and only two commented critically while the number of favorable and critical statements regarding the Negative teacher by children choosing the Positive teacher were zero and six, respectively.

It is evident, therefore, that imitation of the incidental behavior of a teacher and preferences for her are not very closely related. From Table 4, it can be seen that an index of preference, based on the number of times out of four choices the Negative teacher was preferred over the Positive teacher, does not discriminate between Positive Imitators, Negative Imitators and Non-Imitators. Additional data suggesting that the processes mediating preference are different from those mediating imitation are provided in Table 5, which shows that in the Disadvantaged group, the children who prefer the Positive teacher are significantly less dependent than the children who prefer the Negative teacher.

TABLE 4

Mean Preferences for Negative Teacher
as a Function of Imitative Style

Positive Imitators	Negative Imitators	Non-Imitators
(N = 14)	(N = 4)	(N = 12)
1.3*	1.8	1.4

* Score above 2 indicates preference for Negative Teacher and below 2 greater preference for Positive Teachers; Range of Scores is from 0-4.

TABLE 5

Mean Dependency Scores as a function of Preference for Positive vs. Negative Teacher and Socio-economic Status

Advantaged		Disadvantaged	
Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
(N = 10)	(N = 9)	(N = 4)	(N = 8)
20.5	17.4	14.0	19.3
	t = 1.1	u = 4.5	
	$p > .10$	$p < .03$	

DISCUSSION

The children exposed to the films did, indeed, imitate the behavior of the teacher models, although the degree of imitation was dependent on a number of variables. Thus, in accordance with the first hypothesis, there was significantly greater imitation of the rewarding than of the criticizing teacher. This difference, however, holds only for the children from the more advantaged background. Inasmuch as the different teaching styles were displayed by different teachers, there may be a confounding of personality with teacher style even though equally experienced and attractive teachers were selected for each role. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that preference for a teacher was unrelated to imitation of that teacher, suggesting that in this situation teacher's personality and appearance were irrelevant or at least less important than her consistent use of reward or criticism in determining the imitative behavior.

The anticipated interaction between imitation of the Negative teacher and aggression was not supported by the data. A much larger sample on a different situation producing imitation of the Negative teacher is required to provide an adequate test of this hypothesis. The low degree of imitation in general among the Disadvantaged children was one factor contributing to the small sample available for contrasting Positive Imitators with Negative Imitators. The lack of imitation by the Disadvantaged children if found for other kinds of responses, would have important implications for the instruction of these children. Additional

research is required to determine whether this finding is a reflection of weak imitative tendencies, or is specific to the imitation of middle-class teacher models, or to the kind of incidental imitative responses manipulated in this study. If a teacher's values and standards are reflected in behaviors incidental to her formal educational objectives, then group and individual differences in imitative tendencies are significant factors determining whether these values and standards are acquired by the child.

In accordance with results of other studies, the present data indicate that the child's degree of dependency is an important individual difference variable influencing imitative behavior. While the previous findings of a positive correlation between dependency and imitation is extended to elementary school age boys with learning problems, it does not appear to hold for disadvantaged children with similar learning problems. The positive association between imitation of the rewarding teacher and dependency in the Advantaged children contrasts with the correlation between dependency and preference for the Negative teacher in the Disadvantaged group. There are many possible explanations for this relationship. Perhaps the antecedent conditions for producing dependency may be different for the Advantaged and Disadvantaged child. Whereas frequent manifestations of dependent behavior by the middle class boy may be largely a function of past indulgence and reinforcement of dependent behaviors in the home, in the lower-class child, the dependent behaviors observed in the

classroom may be due primarily to repeated frustrations of dependency needs in the home. These dependent Disadvantaged children may, therefore, respond favorably to the combination of interest and control presented by the critical teacher. This difference could account for the discrepant relationship between modeling and dependency in these two socio-economic groups. Moreover, if other evidence is obtained to support this assumption, it would suggest further that the teacher should respond differentially to dependent behaviors of lower-class and middle-class children. The former would require additional attention, while the dependent responses of the latter should be ignored.

The diverse relationships obtained between imitation and dependency and between preference and dependency indicate that imitation and preference are mediated by different processes. The independence of the preference and imitation measures further points to the need for multiple measures in evaluating the effects of a teacher or an instructional program. In this study, the child's attitude toward a teacher was unrelated to the teacher's influence upon him. In other kinds of situations, there may be a closer relationship between attitude and influence. The results do suggest caution in making inferences regarding effects upon learning from a child's evaluation of his teacher.

The imitation effects observed in the present study are probably temporary and also consist of rather peripheral behaviors of teachers. There is, undoubtedly, a wide gap between

these effects and inferences regarding teachers' incidental influence upon significant personality traits, attitudes and values of their pupils. Yet, one must consider that the experimental subjects watched the two films for a total of eight minutes, while a school child is with his teacher five hours a day, five days a week, for a period of at least four to five months. One can anticipate considerable effects upon children resulting from intensive exposure to a teacher over a time period of that length. The empirical and theoretical issue is to determine what type of teacher or teaching style produces imitation effects on what kinds of children over what range of behaviors.

FOOTNOTES

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